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Either a Miracle or a Fluke

An excerpt from the novel Hunger in America

The night is busy, one call after another. Jack Dempsey Cliff's cab smells of cigarette smoke, and his pockets are tight with money. A roll of bills in one, a pound of change in the other. He orders fish and french fries at the Beachcomber but gets dispatched to 1818 Mission again while waiting for the food. He picks up Evey and Marie and begins to drive them across town to Alder for a house call. Both wear stylish dresses, a lot of jewelry, and high, thick-heeled shoes. They look very nice, Evey and Marie. A little tired, but kind of sophisticated, like chesty models. Their conversation covers a wide range of topics, such as:

How Marie cut her bottom on the spring sticking out of the seat padding in the last cab she rode in.

How she should be able to sue the cab company for a lot of money, but the legal system is fucked so she probably wouldn't get a penny.

How Evey's getting too skinny.

How Marie's a smoker, so even though she's in good shape she doesn't jog well.

How Evey has given up gin because of her stomach, but when someone offers to buy, well, what's she supposed to say?

How Marie is glad she doesn't have that problem.

How they all ought to jog together, get matching sweatsuits that say Eighteen Eighteen Camp for Girls and jog early in the morning along the bay.

How they could make up hilarious songs to sing while they ran.

How Marie wishes she could get a nice tan.

How Evey doesn't think Marie needs a tan, being Mexican, or whatever.

How the pizza they had for dinner wasn't sitting well with Evey.

How pepperoni will do that sometimes, but Evey should maybe go to a doctor for her stomach if it stays bad.

Then Marie says to Jack, "Haven't I seen you some place before?"

"I ate a cheeseburger next to you at Solly's yesterday." It's true, but it's also true that Jack threw himself on the floor to look up her dress at the Pier Pub, his first night in town. He doesn't mention that.

"A what?" Marie asks Evey. "What did he say?"

"He said a cheeseburger."

"At Solly's," Jack says. Just thinking about it makes his mouth water again. "I was sitting behind you guys yesterday. That's the last thing I've eaten."

"What are you, fasting?" Marie asks.

"No," Jack says. "Just working and sleeping, I guess. You were eating clams."

"Oh," Marie says.

"Were they good?"

"What?" Marie asks Evey. "What's he saying?"

"He wants to know if the clams were good."

"Yeah," Marie says. "They were fine. You know, something's wrong with your car. Noisy!"

"Bad injectors," Jack says.

"Bad what?"

"Bad injectors."

"Injectors?" She giggles. "That's awful!"

There's a short pause. Jack's got food on the brain. "The clams sound great but I always get the cheeseburger. Best deal in town."

"You mean when you're not sleeping or going around with a bad injector!" Marie laughs. "You really ought to eat something besides cheeseburgers, you know."

"I do."

"What?"

"He eats something besides cheeseburgers," Evey says to Marie.

"Yeah, I heard him," Marie says. "That's very nice to know, but—"

"I like spaghetti too," Jack says.

"Clams are best," Marie says. "I really think you should try the clams."

"Clams are expensive."

"Damn right they are," Marie says. Then, "Oh, *now* I know where I've seen you!"

After he threw himself on the floor between her legs that first night at the Pier Pub, Jack traced with his finger the inside of her calf and thigh up toward her black underwear. She could have stepped on his face but she didn't. Instead she said, *That's an expensive touch*, and he said, *No problem, I'll do it for free*, and she stepped away, over him, smiled nicely but said, *You're broke, right? Well, I work for a living*.

Then Jack stood up and walked back to the bar, stared again at the wall above the mirror, the photograph of the Kodiak Island Boxing Champion, July 4, 1953, his father. A close-up of Kid

Cliff's face, everything but his immediate features was slightly out of focus. The light gray of his cheeks melded with the lighter gray behind until in some places Jack couldn't tell where the man began and the background ended. His head tilted forward, and his dark gray eyes looked up almost seductively from under bushy eyebrows. His shiny hair was combed neatly back and plastered close to his head. A suppressed smile curled the corner of his pale lips.

Jack stood at the bar and looked at the picture and imagined his father hearing laughter. The irony galled him. There he was, Kid Cliff, just three weeks after he'd left his wife and infant son in Wisconsin. A soldier, a farmer, a fisherman, dirty tattoos plastered the length of his body, and hands—the bartender told Jack—he had hands like chunks of raw meat. Sure he did.

Yet in his photograph for posterity they have him looking like John Barrymore.

In the cab, Jack can see Marie's dark eyes staring at him in the rear view mirror. Last time he was lucky to get away unhurt. This time, he's got money to lose.

"Boy," he says, "I'm hungry."

She smiles. "That's your problem, Mister."

"You know," Evey says, "if I drink just one glass of OJ when I get up then I don't have to eat again until evening, sometimes never."

"Listen to her," Marie says to Jack. "She's worse than you with your cheeseburgers. She's going to starve herself."

Jack says he heard on the radio that a person can be overweight and still starve to death without the right vitamins and stuff.

Evey says that hunger can be gotten over with your brain—

there's a point where you don't care anymore—and besides, her stomach hurts even more when she eats.

Marie says she's heard about that brain stuff, but doesn't see much point in it, or think anybody should push it.

Evey's sister had cancer and meditated her way out of it.

Marie can't even imagine that shit.

Evey says that a person never knows what he or she can do until faced with one of those big things.

Marie says that's true but still.

Evey doesn't have time to see a doctor anyway, at least not a stomach doctor.

Marie says she's feeling good tonight, feeling invincible.

That reminds Evey of the time someone laid a line of coke along the entire length of the Pier Pub bar.

Jack says he heard that too.

Evey says, "I could use a good bump right now, that's for sure."

At Alder, Jack drops them off and watches as they hustle up to the house. Under the porch light by the front door, Evey sags, puts a hand on her bony hip. Jack wonders if she's dying—and then he can see in the dark hollow under her eyes that she probably is. Marie lights a cigarette. She lets it dangle from her mouth while she giggles and straightens Evey's pale lavender dress.

Gil, the dispatcher, has radioed Jack that the Beachcomber called and his fish and fries are ready to be picked up. Jack's stomach hurts. He drives toward town, fast because he thinks he might start drooling. He thinks about the guy he met with the Chinese warlord tattoo on his back and wonders if anybody ever gets a hamburger and french fry tattoo. He wonders if Evey's stomach feels like this all the time. He takes a left on Mill Bay and is start-

ing up the hill when he sees three people on the side of the road raise their hands to flag him down. Jesus. He wants to drive by but it's raining and he can't.

They're Filipinos. Filipinos never tip and some of the cabbies won't pick them up, but Jack likes them, generally. These three smell funny. The old man wiggles his nose like a rabbit and can't even get into the cab. He keeps stepping up onto the seat so the women, maybe his daughters, show him where to step so he can sit down. Foot on the floor, now lowering his hips, twisting slightly—that's it—ducking the rest of his body through the door, yes, and sitting. Poor guy must be sick or something. Only three fingers and a thumb on one hand, two and a thumb on the other. Maybe he's never been in a car, but that's ridiculous. What is it they smell like? Some kind of greasy vegetable or spaghetti-fed dog meat. Eating dogs is the one thing he doesn't like about Filipinos. But it's possible the old guy was at the Death March and saved Kid Cliff's life and was crippled by a Jap bayonet. Tortured. It could be Jack owes his life to this old man. It could be, and yet there's no way of knowing. Only doubting, of course. Millions of things could have happened to keep Jack from being born, to keep him from living as long as he's lived (thirty years in some cultures is old age) yet here he is anyway! When he thinks about the odds against any specific person being born . . . against himself . . . well, he's either a miracle or a fluke. But if certainly Jack is (and he is), when the odds were so stacked against his even being born, then this old man who probably didn't save Kid Cliff's life, certainly must have saved Kid Cliff's life. And therefore he saved Jack.

For if this old Filipino's great-great-grandmother had died of some disease along with the rest of her family when she was ten,

then she would never have become the mother of X, who became the mother of Y, who became the mother of Z, who became the mother of this old guy, who saved Kid Cliff's life by giving him water during the Death March, sure, an act that cost him three fingers, which allowed Kid Cliff to make the sperm that he would eventually deposit in Lorraine one autumn evening when nothing else in the world mattered except the sweaty union of two mortals in an upstairs bedroom of a Wisconsin farmhouse. And now here is Jack, sitting in his cab *not not-being*. A possible fluke, but he just can't chuck the possibility of a miracle either. Like the ideas of falling in love and being happy, the idea of a miracle is tenacious as hell.

Mary could still be in Wisconsin. Mary could be waiting for him . . . Maybe Jack came to Alaska to realize only this: there's no such thing as an answer, only hope.

But there's more, he thinks. Of course. Kodiak is his father. He came here to put his face against his father's strong chest, feel his father's arms wrap around his back and shoulders. And more too, which perhaps is the problem. His father is dead. Jack came to Kodiak to dig a grave and bury him.

But how? he thinks. And where? And how will he even know when he has?

All three passengers are dressed in their go-to-cannery clothes—rubber boots, colorful scarves, sweatshirts, cloth gloves on their laps. Maybe the old man is farting and that's what the smell is. He's wiggling his nose like a rabbit, so perhaps he smells it too. His daughter has to pronounce the name of the cannery three times before Jack can understand. Jack's very polite—*What's that, ma'am? What's that, ma'am? Oh yes, ma'am*—imagining the sound of a bayonet slicing off a finger, another finger, another

finger. The sound a man makes. Is enduring pain in itself an act of bravery? Is dying? Or is bravery *risking* pain, *risking* death for what you love or believe in? And where does Kid Cliff stand in all this? Did he sacrifice Lorraine and Jack, long before he came home from the prison camps, in order to survive? Or did he sacrifice himself one sunny day in June 1953 so that *they* could survive? Was it painful for him? Or easy? Was he lonely? Or simply forgetful?

The questions. They go on and on. After the Death March, Kid Cliff had three and a half more years of starvation and capricious torture to endure. Would the fingers of this heroic old Filipino man have been wasted if Kid Cliff had died on the Hell Ship to Japan, throat slit by a thirsty comrade? Those things happened. There are lots of people who weren't born because their fathers died on those ships in 1944, regardless of any heroism or providence that might have kept them alive until then. Does Jack's existence validate the old man's sacrifice? *Don't think of it!* They can ride for free, sure, and Jack himself is going to help the old man out of the cab.

In a book Jack read about the Death March, a veteran told about a 30-year reunion of survivors back in the Philippines. Hanging on the side of their bus was a banner that said, *Defenders of Bataan*. When the Filipinos read that, even the children, they held up their fingers in a V. "What do those kids know about us?" one of the veterans asked the bus driver, who answered, "Joe, they may not know English, or how to read and write, but they know about Bataan."

No matter how strange this old guy is, Jack thinks, if it weren't for him Jack wouldn't be alive. Sentimentality can be as seductive as pornography, so thinking this is irresistible, and by now Jack's

almost convinced of its truth. Oh boy. It pleases him no end to feel goose bumps rising on the back of his neck. Sitting in the back seat between a couple of Asian princesses is a veritable king, a mortal god, a nose-twitching rabbit of a seven-fingered man in whose common-suffering corpse-reek lies the naked seeds of miracles. Yessir.

When they arrive at the cannery, Jack hops out and runs around to open the door. He lends a hand to one of the princesses, but she's already standing, so he bends to help the king. Standing next to him now, on the gravel, Jack leans over and whispers "Bataan" into the royal ear. The king cocks his head, straining to hear. One of the princesses points to her own ear, then to the king's.

Jack whispers it again, *Bataan*, louder; then thumb to his chest, Jack points at himself.

Wrinkling his nose, sniffing, shuffling uncomfortably, finally the king breaks into a grin. Jack feels flushed. King extends his three-fingered hand, and Jack shakes it, thinking of miracles and torn flesh, falling in love with dog meat.

"José," the old man says. "Vedy, vedy fine, thank you."